

## **Making Faith Real:**

### **Su Kwak's Light and Time Series**

It is hardly possible to understand Su Kwak without considering both her Asian and American heritage. Born in Busan in 1949, Kwak was raised in Korea and came to this country when she was 23. She has lived continuously in the United States since then, except for a brief period of time between 2000 and 2002 when her husband's work took the two of them to Korea. Thus, for all that Kwak now strikes one as completely American in speech, manner and mores, she has not lost her identity as a Korean and, indeed, remains as active in the art world there as here.

Through her paintings, Su Kwak is committed to answering the fundamental questions of art and religion; she approaches those enigmas with a humility born of understanding their difficulty. The way Kwak mixes intellectuality and religion, her gentle but determined effort to amalgamate spirituality and art, are, to me, what most characterizes her work throughout her career.

In her 2001 essay on Kwak, Eleanor Heartney commented on how hard it is for "contemporary artists and commentators to accept the possibility of a link between art and spirituality." She wrote that Kwak's paintings "represent an effort to find a more universal form for her spiritual aspirations. In this endeavor, she has turned to an exploration of the metaphoric possibilities of light and color....The title 'Beyond Light' [is] a name which indicates her desire to move beyond the physical description of light towards its spiritual expression. Dematerializing form, light becomes a metaphor for the invisible soul." (Su Kwak: Beyond Light into Spirit, Ellen Kim Murphy Gallery: 2001). Heartney's analysis is very perceptive. Clearly, Kwak seeks universal forms for her spiritual aspirations.

Kwak also came to believe that painting should not report on, record or respond to what the eye sees, but rather must manifest concepts, feelings and other

immaterial things in a tangible physical form. Thus, Korean art critic B.Y. Kim quotes a story that Su Kwak tells in her published memoir *Light in the Heart: A Story of Art and Love* (Dana Gi Hoek, Korea: 2002):

One day I was passing in front of the City Hall when I saw a blind man walking with a stick. I thought that although this man could not see physical light, he could experience light internally. I wanted to express this internal light, this light in his heart.

Two points are clear from this quotation. First, Kwak seeks to capture light, which is immaterial, in the material form of her paintings. Second, light for Kwak has spiritual meaning. Combining these points, it may well be that Su Kwak, while really interested in the spirit, explores light because light, although immaterial, can be manifested in a painting. The spirit, on the other hand, being so much more a thing of God, ultimately has to be left in the realm of the mysterious.

Of her painting *Light and Water* (2008), for example, Kwak has said that what fascinated her was not just the sunlight on the water, but the idea of water itself. Water is fascinating if you consider that what we see when we look at it is only its surface. Furthermore, we see the surface of the water only because there is light hitting it. Water is then a material that has the power to manifest immaterial light.

One might say the same about sky, another subject that Kwak has painted many times, or about the rainbows that appear frequently in her work. This is also true of the sun, the subject of many of the paintings in her present series. What Kwak chooses to paint always pushes past the literal.

Kwak says that her painting *Harvest* (2008) symbolizes hope. She tells how her father's rice farm had only one good crop in ten seasons because of floods. At one point, Kwak glued dry wheat stalks onto the painting of *Harvest*. Later, she scraped them off, but left visible the marks that the husks created. Kwak states that she likes how the "time element leaves its trace in the canvas." That is to say,

she sees her paintings as having a kind of memory, the history of the work leaving its mark on it, just as that one good harvest of so long ago left its mark on Kwak.

Moreover, *Harvest*, a work about memory, shares many qualities with her paintings *Journey* (2008), which she says was inspired by sailboats, and *Cloud Light* (2008), the result of seeing the land from an airplane. Not only does her work explore light and its effects on the world; it is also a search to represent memories, hopes and other feelings, a search to make the immaterial real.

A good recent example of Kwak's approach is found in her work *New Sky* (2008) from the artist's present *Light and Time* series. First painted in 2002, Kwak reworked the painting for an exhibition in 2004 and then reworked it a third time to produce its current incarnation. *New Sky* shows half of one of Kwak's round "suns" to the right, giving off rays made from lines of scripture cut from a Korean bible. The canvas is dominated by the light blue sky, which has an opening cut into it. Kwak has peeled the canvas back to reveal a second canvas beneath, painted an even lighter blue.

According to Kwak, her current *Light and Time* series evolved as she "went past personal things to address larger issues of religion and art." Kwak attributes her ability to do this to the development of her faith. Finally, she says that what she likes most about her new work is "how real things have become."

One way to understand these comments is to see Kwak's latest paintings as the culmination of what she had accomplished earlier. Early on, Kwak considered how light could be made material in water, sky and other things, including, of course, paintings. After understanding it was possible to give the immaterial a material form, she made paintings that manifested her own thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Kwak's work then was very personal. As she grew as a person, so, too, did her work. Thus, her new work now transcends the personal and enters the realm of universal questions and issues.

Since 1992, Su Kwak has been cutting and folding her canvases. In *Harvest*, for example, within the square of the three-inch borders that she normally gives her images, *Harvest* shows the yellow circle of another sun. Kwak has cut the circle of the sun in *Harvest* free at its top and then glued the resulting flap of canvas down into an elegant "S" curve. Revealed thus is the wood framing, which is in the form of a cross.

The bottom of the vertical bar of the cross is painted onto the canvas, but its top half is a real wooden cross, revealed by the opened sun. Where the folds and cuts in Kwak's paintings were once miniscule, they have now grown to the point where the slit in her recent work, *New Sky*, reaches more than half way across this large canvas.

Cutting, peeling and suturing the canvas is central to her new body of work. Opening up the picture plane in this way is a well-known method of bridging painting and sculpture and of exposing the artifice of art. Elisabeth Sussman has compared Kwak's working methods to Lucio Fontana's (*Su Kwak: Healing Light*, June Kelly Gallery: 2004). Like Fontana, Kwak cuts her paintings with great care.

This is clear in her watercolor *Blue Sun* (2007). Here, we see another of Kwak's sun circles, richly colored in blue and yellow. The deep complex tones in *Blue Sun* are the result of her layered painting method. The rays that emanate from this sun are made from more than thirty cuts. The slits are grouped into three areas and are carefully spaced so that they work together harmoniously. Fontana slit his canvases and otherwise left them untouched, while Kwak uses her slits much more extensively and in a more complex manner. Kwak says that she makes the cut and then lets it naturally open over time. The result is that the areas between the slits take on a beautiful rounded form that gives the painting a three-dimensional element.

Finally, in stressing how the work of Su Kwak is beautiful and well-crafted, I realize there are many people today who see an aspiration to beauty or skill as being as

out of date as an aspiration towards spirituality. However, it has been my experience (and the experience of many who study the history of art) that what tends to survive the test of time is usually that which is best made and visually most compelling. Skill and beauty may be in the eye of the beholder, but even if we cannot define them absolutely, we can still recognize them. For that reason, I believe the art of Su Kwak will have a rich future.

Sandy Kita

Sandy Kita is professor of art history and senior scholar at Chatham University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.